

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001079

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS
LONDON FOR BELL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/16/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION PREDICTS PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS IN SEVERAL MONTHS

REF: COLOMBO 1073 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a June 17 meeting, Karu Jayasuriya, Deputy Leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), told poloff that while none of the major parties wants polls right now, he "would not be surprised" if President Chandrika Kumaratunga called parliamentary elections in "three or four months." The UNP's preferred scenario, he said, would be presidential elections in November 2005. Faced with growing voter dissatisfaction at the rising cost of living, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) may have used disagreement with the President over the so-called "joint mechanism" as a pretext to leave the government, Jayasuriya suggested. While the UNP supports the concept of a structure to coordinate tsunami relief, he expressed personal reservations about some

SIPDIS

purported features of the agreement, and noted that the President's continued unwillingness to publish the document was fueling suspicion and fear. End summary.

UNP WANTS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS,
BUT EXPECTS PARLIAMENTARY POLLS

2. (C) In a June 17 meeting, Karu Jayasuriya, Deputy Leader of the United National Party (UNP), told poloff that rather than having "another shaky government"--which he believed certain to result from another parliamentary election--the best option before the nation now is to hold presidential elections at the end of 2005. The country needs strong leadership, he emphasized. The UNP's preferred scenario is unlikely to transpire, however, he conceded, because certain interpretations of the Constitution give President Kumaratunga two full six-year terms as President, making elections not due until the end of 2006.

3. (C) None of the major parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), wants to face parliamentary elections right now, Jayasuriya said. Nonetheless, he said he "would not be surprised" if the President called elections in "three or four months." The reason, he speculated, is that Kumaratunga is not yet ready to call an end to her political life and, facing the end of her presidential term, may decide to extend her political longevity as Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition. "It might even be better for her to get into the opposition" right now, Jayasuriya added, given the difficulties she encountered running a coalition government. She might also settle for the post of Prime Minister--which yields significantly less power than that of the President--if she could insert a puppet as President--he suggested Buddhist Affairs Minister Ratnasiri Wickremenayake--who could be counted on to do her bidding, Jayasuriya predicted. Kumaratunga would never allow current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse into that post, he emphasized, because she regards Rajapakse as a threat to her dynastic ambitions for her children.

4. (SBU) Jayasuriya claimed that the UNP had been making some gains in winning back voters after the 2004 elections; the JVP had also made impressive inroads, primarily into the SLFP's rural voter base. The net loser at the next polls would be the SLFP, he predicted (not surprisingly). (Comment: The UNP is apparently wasting no time in preparing for the possibility of upcoming polls. Having just completed a trip down south, Jayasuriya told poloff that he was traveling over the next few days to districts in the northwest. End comment.)

JVP DECISION:
PRINCIPLED STAND OR CUTTING ITS LOSSES?

5. (C) The JVP "acquired a lot of political strength and

achieved a lot" during its 14 months in government, Jayasuriya asserted, but the spiraling cost of living was beginning to lose the JVP ground among its rural voter base. The JVP had been unable to fulfill the high expectations of the largely rural, nationalist voters who had helped put them in power, Jayasuriya continued. He pointed to the JVP's loss in the April cooperative board election in Tissamaharama, Hambantota--where the JVP controls the local council--as a crucial litmus test. "Had the JVP stayed (in the alliance) longer, the damage would have been more critical," Jayasuriya commented. The Marxists may have seized on the joint mechanism as a pretext to leave the alliance, he indicated. "The JVP plays to the gallery," he observed. By fixating on the national sovereignty/territorial integrity issues raised by the controversial joint mechanism, the JVP can appeal to Sinhalese nationalism while diverting scrutiny from the lackluster performance of the economy.

WHAT IS IN THAT DOCUMENT?

16. (C) Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told the President the UNP supports the concept of a mechanism on tsunami relief as long as such a mechanism is consistent with

SIPDIS
the Oslo Declaration, Jayasuriya confirmed. That said, it is difficult for the UNP to support a document that its leadership has never seen, he emphasized. He then proceeded to enumerate a number of personal reservations about what he understands to be some of its features. It was "bad marketing" for the government to depict itself as the representative of the Sinhalese community, he charged; the government should represent all communities. Why is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) given a voice in tsunami reconstruction in territories not under its control?

SIPDIS
The LTTE controls only 49 of 319 village councils in the affected area. (Note: The JVP has expressed the same concerns to us.) One percent of the Sri Lankan Muslim population was lost in the tsunami, Jayasuriya said. If any community deserves greater representation in the mechanism, it is the Muslims. Finally--and most important--why is the President keeping the contents of the agreement out of the public eye? People are assuming there is something "bad" in it she does not want revealed, he said. He added that he had heard many of these concerns voiced by various non-JVP audiences in the south--he cited a group of retired civil servants and a group of lawyers--during his public meetings over the past few days.

COMMENT

17. (C) The UNP may not want parliamentary elections right now, but its leadership is obviously (and wisely) preparing for them. That presumably non-JVP members of the public are using the Marxists' arguments against the joint mechanism is a testament to the success of the JVP propaganda machine. Some analysts have suggested that the President's refusal to share the text of the agreement with the JVP injured the Marxists' pride and played a major role in their decision to leave the government. Kumaratunga's continued refusal to share the text with the public is now fueling fears that the agreement contains damaging concessions to the Tigers. The longer the President delays signing the agreement, the more vociferous these voices and the more ingrained these suspicions will become.

LUNSTEAD